

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

FEB 25 1993

MOTION PICTURE, BROADCASTING
AND RECORDED SOUND DIVISION

MOTION PICTURE, BROADCASTING AND RECORDED SOUND DIVISION (M/B/RS) TESTIMONY
FOR NATIONAL FILM PRESERVATION ACT HEARINGS

February 25, 1993

MOTION PICTURE, BROADCASTING AND RECORDED SOUND (M/B/RS) COLLECTIONS.

The Motion Picture, Broadcasting and Recorded Sound Division is custodian of the Library's collections of motion pictures, television and radio broadcasts and sound recordings. There are more than 350,000 reels of motion picture film; 165,000 video tapes and 2,500,000 sound recordings. The Division recommends additions to the collections, receives new materials and organizes and catalogs them, services collections to researchers and is responsible for preservation of the formats held, many of which are fragile and have varied preservation problems. Selection, proper storage, organization, and cataloging are essential before quality preservation can take place. We strongly believe that making preserved films available to researchers and the public is the ultimate purpose of preservation.

LC's motion picture collection is large and varied. We believe that it should amply reflect what is produced in the United States supplemented by examples of films from other nations. We select quality productions but we also take into account the wide variety of purposes and interests that film serves. The collection, therefore, includes the famous, the obscure, the unique and some of the ordinary.

Some highlights of the collection.

- o Films of all types (theatrical features, documentaries, newsreels, educational films, etc.) selected from copyright registrations, 1942-present. A generous selection of more than 30,000 titles from a half century of American film production.
- o Paper Print Collection of more than 3,000 films made prior to 1915
- o Other films from the silent era: Several thousand features, short subjects and news films and special collections of pioneers of the film industry such as Mary Pickford, George Kleine and the Thanhouser Company.

- o Nitrate pre-print for feature films and short subjects by major Hollywood producers: Warner Bros. (3500 titles, 1919-1948), Columbia Pictures (4250 titles, 1927-1952), RKO Radio Pictures (1150 titles, 1931-1948), Universal Pictures (600 titles, 1930-1950), Paramount Picture (120 titles, 1913-1931), Walt Disney Productions (200 titles, 1930-1950), and Hal Roach Studios (625 titles, 1927-1945).

Motion Picture Preservation Program:

Since 1971, the Library has operated its own motion picture conservation laboratory, the only archive in the U. S. with such a facility. The laboratory was created because of the quantity of nitrate film held by the Library (more than 110,000 reels) and the difficulties encountered when we asked commercial laboratories to preserve older film.

Managing an active motion picture preservation program has proven a major challenge. We hired some veteran laboratory professionals and their experience was vital to establishing the program, but we found that to preserve the film correctly, we had to devise new preservation techniques and learn from the experience of other archives. This program has had some important achievements but there are also nagging unsolved problems that must be resolved before the program can achieve the goals we have set for ourselves.

Achievements:

- o Acquisition of more than 25,000 films from the nitrate era, many of which would have been lost. The assistance of the American Film Institute and the cooperation of the film industry, private collectors and other archives in the U. S. and abroad has contributed to the rescuing of a significant part of our national film heritage.
- o The establishment of a Conservation Laboratory with basic equipment designed or modified to handle most of the problems confronted in duplicating black and white nitrate motion picture film and the training of a small, but capable, staff of nitrate film conservators.
- o Establishing a study center for interested scholars using moving pictures in scholarly research. We have contributed to and benefitted from a significant growth in the serious study of film and use of film by scholars in research on a variety of topics. This is a new aspect of scholarship and the Library is proud to have been part of its creation.
- o Active cooperation with other film archives in the U. S. and abroad. Because preservation of moving images is so new, the process of preservation has been a learning experience. The exchange of information among professionals in the U. S. and abroad has been invaluable and very rewarding.

Problems:

A. Specific to the Library of Congress:

1. Lack of adequate staff to keep pace with deteriorating films that require preservation work.

Situation is most acute in the conservation laboratory and in quality control, but staff shortages in our storage vaults have made it impossible to examine collections as regularly as desirable and to make proper identification records for all the films in the collection.

2. Shrinking appropriations for film preservation. The present appropriation is at the same level as 1975, with a small annual increase for inflation. The size of the collection and costs of film stock and related supplies have risen at a much greater rate; so the dollars do not go as far today.
3. We lack accurate information on the condition and preservation needs of specific films and hence, cannot accurately calculate the resources needed to care for the whole collection.

A complete examination of each film requiring preservation has not been possible because of the lack of staff.

Improvements in preservation techniques have made it advisable to re-do some earlier preservation work.

4. Lack of facilities for preservation work.

Because abusive use, climate and time are our worst enemies, the vital first stage of preservation work is correct storage of archival materials. Our nitrate vaults, which are among the best in the U. S., are almost 50 years old and were constructed to meet minimum storage standards. They were designed as warehouse facilities rather than as archival facilities so they are below today's desired quality levels. The former assumption was that nitrate would be copied and then destroyed, but this view has now been challenged by the studios and the archival community.

Lab building has only enough space for existing preservation staff and equipment. This limits our preservation work to black and white film. We lack step contact printing capability; sound analyzers and duplication equipment and we cannot process color film. Rerecording of sound tracks and copying of color film is now done by commercial laboratories.

5. Changing nature of moving image acquisitions.

More than 80 per cent of M/B/RS moving image acquisitions today are in video formats. Most of these are 3/4-inch or 1/2-inch video cassettes.

We are very concerned about the quality of recording and the impermanence of these tapes.

More and more filmmakers plead that they cannot deposit in film format, asking us to accept tape as a substitute.

B. Relations with donors

1. Requests to ship nitrate masters to laboratories are too frequent and are unrelated to the preservation requirements of the films. This causes unnecessary damage to the materials, strains relations with the commercial community, and ties up limited staff.
2. Film archives and commercial owners have different definitions of film preservation and restoration. Experience shows that the most popular films, which are often the most frequently shipped, are most in need of preservation to protect them.

C. Relations between film archives.

1. Competition for funds has led to duplication of effort. Contributors to film preservation often want to fund popular titles so the same films are preserved by more than one archive.
2. Lack of consistent leadership at AFI's National Center has neutralized its effectiveness as an archival coordinator, a role that had been assigned to it through its administration of the NEA's grants program.

AFI's fundraising for their own programs has turned them into a competitor for funding rather than a source of funding, the role they played during the 1970's and early 1980's. While this does not directly affect the Library, it does affect the cooperation among archives because it increases competition for funds.

3. During the 1980's there was a significant growth in the number of institutions collecting and preserving moving images. Almost all of these new archives are collecting safety film or television. Most of them concentrate on specific aspects of production (experimental cinema, ethnic cinema, news and documentation, etc.) or on state or local interests. This is a valuable development, but the new organizations need financial support, training and advice. They are understandably impatient with the older, more established film archives who want to solve existing preservation problems before moving into new areas.

Present and Future Needs:

1. Acquisition of motion pictures and related material.

- o A method of acquiring archival quality master copies of motion pictures at the time of production so that they can be stored from the start in archival conditions.
- o The means of acquiring or making serviceable copies that can be viewed by researchers without requiring access to the archival master. The service copies should accurately present the film as it was originally released and shown.
- o A program for systematically acquiring scripts, stills, posters and other film related materials which document films in the collection. As a corollary, there should be a program to organize, catalog and preserve such materials.

2. Preservation by duplication of deteriorating film.

- o Larger and better storage facilities for nitrate film and for safety base master material.
- o A program to recruit and train young people in moving image conservation.
- o Research and development programs to give us better information about the nature of the materials being preserved and the correct techniques and practices required to preserve them.
- o Establishment of standards for preservation laboratory work and storage which could be used by archives and the film industry. These would be based upon recommendations of the Federation International des Archives du Film, SMPTE, ANSI and new research. Standards are needed to define correct production of master materials, quality control, storage conditions, proper shelving, containers and even for labels that do not fall off.

3. Collection control, cataloging and access:

- o Improvement of existing inventory systems to control all aspects of preservation work and the ability to communicate with cataloging systems and with inventory systems used by other institutions.
- o Creation and implementation of a cataloging system designed to provide the most comprehensive access to the collections which serves scholars, staff and the archival community. It should be able to communicate with existing bibliographic systems.